

### Russia-EU: competing logics of region building

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# DGAPanalyse

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## Russia—EU: Competing Logics of Region Building

by Andrey Makarychev



## Summary

# Russia—EU: Competing Logics of Region Building

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In this paper I will argue that Russia and the European Union have different visions of their roles and instruments in their common neighborhood. Russia treats most ex-Soviet states as “naturally” belonging to the zone of its vital interests, hence the “near abroad” concept and the concomitant reluctance to admit any role for Western institutions in the region. The EU in turn relies mostly on its “soft power” resources, including norm projection, in order to foster domestic transformation in the neighboring countries and make them more compatible with the European understanding of partnership. Yet despite these obvious differences, there are similarities between Russia and the EU as well. Each tries to distance itself from the other party through a variety of means. Russia wishes to install its political and security monopoly in the “near abroad” by claiming that regional problems have to be resolved on the regional level, i.e. without involvement from the outside. The EU however increasingly prefers to focus on “regions-in-the-making” where Russia is viewed as an external power rather than as a constitutive member of regional structures (such as the South Caucasus region and Central Asia). As a result of this mutual “othering” (i.e. ascribing characteristics of difference), both Russia and the EU develop their own policy instruments and strategies for the common neighborhood instead of engaging neighboring countries in full-fledged cooperation. Both Russian and EU policies lack elements of inter-subjective interaction with their neighbors, which makes the Eastern Partnership more of an EU policy tool rather than a common forum of co-partnership with Eastern European and Caucasian countries. In a similar vein, the Customs Union project is more of a reflection of Russia’s great power ambitions in the post-Soviet area than a common approach jointly coordinated by all participating countries. This is one explanation for the preponderance of bilateral relations that both Moscow and Brussels develop with individual countries over more institutionalized forms of multilateral cooperation. Another possible explanation is the continuous process of disaggregation and fragmentation within this vast zone of the common neighborhood, which makes all attempts to propose broad institutional frameworks (like CIS institutions or the Eastern Partnership) dysfunctional.

Yet Russia and the EU will eventually have to find not only a more cooperative *modus operandi* in managing the projects of common interest in their shared neighborhood, but also to systematically engage its neighbors in multilateral projects. Arguably, the best pathway to achieve these goals is through region building aimed at strengthening regional institutional clusters. This process is dependent on a number of factors, among which regional identities plays the crucial role. In this paper I will dwell upon four regions-in-the-making located at the intersection of EU-Russia spheres of interests: Nordic Europe, the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, and the Caspian Sea regions.

## Zusammenfassung

# Russland-EU: Konkurrierende Ansätze von Regionenbildung

von Andrey Makarychev

In dieser Analyse wird argumentiert, dass Russland und die Europäische Union (EU) unterschiedliche Sichtweisen ihrer Rollen und Instrumente in ihrer gemeinsamen Nachbarschaft haben. Russland behandelt die meisten postsowjetischen Staaten so, als ob sie »von Natur aus« in seine Einflusszone gehörten, woraus das Konzept des »Nahen Auslands« und die dazu gehörende Abneigung entstanden ist, westlichen Institutionen irgend eine Rolle in dieser Region zuzugestehen. Die EU wiederum verlässt sich vor allem auf ihre »Soft Power«, wozu auch die Projektion ihres Regelwerks gehört, um in benachbarten Ländern innenpolitische Umgestaltungen zu fördern und sie damit vereinbarer mit dem europäischen Verständnis von Partnerschaft zu machen. Doch trotz dieser offensichtlichen Unterschiede gibt es auch Gemeinsamkeiten zwischen Russland und der EU. Jeder der beiden versucht, sich vom jeweils anderen mittels verschiedener Instrumente zu distanzieren. Russland möchte sein Politik- und Sicherheitsmonopol im »Nahen Ausland« mit der Behauptung durchsetzen, dass regionale Probleme auf der regionalen Ebene gelöst werden müssen, d.h. ohne Einmischung von außen. Die EU dagegen legt zunehmend eher den Schwerpunkt auf »sich bildende Regionen«, innerhalb derer Russland eher als eine auswärtige Macht denn als ein konstitutives Mitglied regionaler Strukturen (wie etwa der südliche Kaukasus und Zentralasien) gesehen wird. Als Ergebnis dieses gegenseitigen »Differenzierens« (also der Zuschreibung von Unterschieden) entwickeln sowohl Russland als auch die EU ihre eigenen Politikinstrumente und Strategien für die gemeinsame Nachbarschaft, anstatt die Nachbarländer in eine voll ausgebaute Zusammenarbeit einzubeziehen. Sowohl Russland wie der EU fehlt es an Elementen intersubjektiver Zusammenarbeit mit ihren Nachbarn, was die Östliche Partnerschaft (ÖP) mehr zu einem Politikinstrument der EU macht statt zu einem gemeinsamen Forum der Teilpartnerschaft mit osteuropäischen und kaukasischen Ländern. Ganz ähnlich ist das Projekt der Zollunion eher eine Reflektion der Großmachtambitionen Russlands für das postsowjetische Gebiet anstatt eines gemeinsamen Vorgehens, im Einverständnis mit allen teilnehmenden Ländern koordiniert. Das ist eine Erklärung für das Vorherrschen von bilateralen Beziehungen, die sowohl Moskau wie Brüssel gegenüber einzelnen Ländern entwickeln anstatt mehr institutionalisierter Formen multilateraler Zusammenarbeit. Eine weitere mögliche Erklärung ist der anhaltende Prozess der Zersetzung und Fragmentierung innerhalb dieser riesigen Zone der gemeinsamen Nachbarschaft, der alle Versuche, breit angelegte institutionelle Rahmen (wie die GUS-Institutionen oder die Östliche Partnerschaft) vorzuschlagen, dysfunktional macht.

Doch werden Russland und die EU letzten Endes nicht nur einen kooperativeren Modus operandi bei der Bewältigung der Projekte gemeinsamen Interesses in ihrer geteilten Nachbarschaft zu entwickeln haben, sondern auch ihre Nachbarn in multilaterale Projekte einbeziehen müssen. Sicherlich ist der beste Weg zur Erreichung dieser Ziele der Aufbau von Regionen, gerichtet auf die Stärkung von Gruppierungen von regionalen Institutionen. Dieser Prozess hängt von einer Reihe von Faktoren ab, worunter regionale Identitäten die entscheidende Rolle spielen. In diesem Aufsatz werde ich mich mit vier entstehenden Regionen beschäftigen, die an den Schnittlinien zwischen den Interessensphären der EU und Russlands liegen: Nordeuropa, die Ostsee-, Schwarzmeer- und die Region des Kaspischen Meeres.

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Die DGAP trägt mit wissenschaftlichen Untersuchungen und Veröffentlichungen zur Bewertung internationaler Entwicklungen und zur Diskussion hierüber bei. Die in den Veröffentlichungen geäußerten Meinungen sind die der Autoren.

# Russia—EU: Competing Logics of Region Building

by Andrey Makarychev

## Introduction

The analysis is grounded in two mutually correlative arguments, one academic and one political. As seen from the scholarly perspective, it is the strengthening of the regional management of global processes that, as many experts in Russia believe, ought to constitute the key element of international relations in the 21st century.<sup>1</sup> Russia's self-description as either a "regional"<sup>2</sup> or "trans-regional power"<sup>3</sup> can be interpreted as an attempt to mildly dissociate itself from the global-level agenda defined by such normative concepts as sustainable development, transparency, accountability, good governance, human security, etc., which play only marginal roles in Russia's foreign policy vocabulary. This reasoning is reinforced by a political strategy of "finding regional solutions to regional problems," as repeatedly uttered by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who—both symbolically and paradoxically—has held relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia in higher regard than relations with G8 partners.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, Russia's policy of solving international conflicts "regionally" is used, as the National Security Strategy suggests, to avoid unwelcome influence by "non-regional powers,"<sup>5</sup> mainly the United States. This political stance could be due to Russian sympathies (which the Kremlin vehemently denies) with sphere of influence thinking, which explains Moscow's low profile in situations that are territorially far away from Russia (such as the "Arab spring").

Yet the practicability of Russia's strategy of questioning external actors' propriety for regional policies is hardly compatible with the trans-nationalization of world politics. The growing structural complexity of (post-)international relations discards two simplistic tenets engrained in Russian regionalist thinking: the alleged harmonious cor-

relation between regionalization and globalization, and the feasibility of neatly dividing the interested actors into two categories, i.e. "insiders" and "outsiders." Both assumptions should be taken with strong reservations and placed within specific regional contexts. To avoid overgeneralizations, one has to admit that certain forms of regionalism are indeed conducive to fostering trans-nationalization and are, therefore, globalization-friendly, while other regional experiences are, in contrast, mostly protective, inward-oriented, and do not fit the global world. By the same token, the distinction between "intra-regional" and "external" subjects is not always clear. For example, geographically the United States is an external actor in both the Baltic and Black Sea regions, but institutionally, as the core country in NATO, the US is inevitably involved in both regions through security commitments to other members of the North Atlantic alliance. Geographically, the EU is not part of the Caspian Sea region, but since many European companies do business there, the EU is not a complete outsider. This situation has practical implications for Russia: Instead of developing its policy in the "near abroad" on a dubious strategy of fencing against "outsiders," Moscow would be better off if it started investing its (rather modest) political and institutional resources in forging more inclusive associative relations with actors interested in fostering region-building in the Russian-EU common neighborhood.

I will start my analysis by briefly describing the contours of the Russian debate on regionalism. I will then depict the regional landscape in the EU-Russia shared neighborhood, singling out four regions-in-the-making with different degrees of institutionalization, where interaction between Russia and the EU is the most dynamic.



## The Russian Debate on Regions and the Neighborhood Policy

Russian attitudes toward regionalism are still heavily influenced by traditional state-centric—and mostly hard-security-driven—power politics calculations.<sup>6</sup> Regionalism is often viewed as a policy of major international powers that are eager to form blocs and alliances to serve their geopolitical purposes. Consequently, major world powers are believed to pursue policies of hegemony by means of building regional alliances—something similar to “the theory of great power orbits,” which presumes that “smaller countries are hardly able to contrive regional integration and stability on their own.”<sup>7</sup>

There is a widespread feeling in Russia that most of the broad concepts of regionalism are grounded in geopolitical thinking and crafted as specific tools meant to boost the expansion of the transatlantic community. “Central and Eastern Europe” and “the Greater Black Sea region” (or “the Black Sea-Mediterranean region”) are viewed with particular suspicion in Russia as regional platforms aimed at more forcefully linking the vast Euro-Asian areas to the enlarging West, strengthening the pivotal security roles played by NATO and the EU in its southern and eastern peripheries, and securing energy transportation routes essential for the West.<sup>8</sup> The alleged “Caspian-Black Sea region” is seen in Russia as an integral part of the US-promoted idea of a “greater Middle East” stretching from Palestine to Pakistan. It is perceived in Moscow as an attempt to detach the Central Asian countries from the putative Russian sphere of influence and to substantiate their historically contingent inclusion in the USSR.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, by promoting a geopolitical vision of the “Caspian-Black Sea region,” the United States and some EU members are viewing regionalism in terms of energy, specifically energy supplies for the West. The concept of a wider Baltic-Black Sea region, known as Intermarun, also contains elements of separating Russia from neighboring countries (like Georgia and Ukraine) that gravitate to the West and are not willing to stay in Moscow’s orbit.

But Russia itself uses a similar logic of wider regions in its foreign policy imagery. For example,

the concept of the “Volga-Caspian region” allows Russian experts to try not only to link external territories to Russian domestic politics, but also to securitize this linkage by presenting the potential weakening of Russia’s positions in the Caspian Sea region as automatically having negative domestic effects.<sup>10</sup> Another example is the Black Sea-Mediterranean nexus which, from the viewpoint of its Russian proponents, is meant to substantiate Russia’s belonging to a wider Europe and thus avoid Russian marginalization.<sup>11</sup> In this light, the Kremlin interpreted the French project of a Union for the Mediterranean as a geopolitical move aimed at strengthening NATO’s presence in the Mediterranean and the Middle East and consolidating Muslim countries under the European aegis, which goes against Russian interests in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The possible counter-balance to an expanding West is believed to be Russia’s consolidation of its own sphere of regional influence, along with its enhanced cooperation with the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Customs Union, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.<sup>12</sup>

In the meantime, some more pragmatic and less confrontational voices have also emerged in the Russian discourse on regionalism. In the Foreign Policy Concept of 2000, the concept of the “Larger Mediterranean” was developed to link the Middle East, Black Sea, and Caspian Sea regions where Russia is expected to play an important role.<sup>13</sup> In the Concept of 2008, however, the tone was less ambitious: Russia declared its eagerness to strengthen the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation and the mechanisms of the Caspian Sea integration,<sup>14</sup> showing that Moscow looks at the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, and the Caspian Sea as separate regions requiring different levels and instruments of Russian participation. The Arab Spring has confirmed the trend of Russia’s gradual disengagement from the Mediterranean region.

The new voices are even more visible in the Russian academic discourse, which admits that the realist reading of regionalism through the prism of spheres of influence is increasingly insufficient and obsolete for a number of reasons. First, glo-

balization does matter for regions-in-the-making. Very often the adjective “regional” is meant to describe an imagined middle ground between the more fully conceptualized global and local levels of analysis.<sup>15</sup> Other Russian scholars argue that the so called macro-regionalization (i. e. the formation of trans-national regions) is “the essence of globalization”<sup>16</sup> since it decisively contributes to the gradual de-sovereignization of nation states,<sup>17</sup> regardless of whether we celebrate or deplore it. Against this backdrop, the spectrum of region-shapers has significantly widened during recent decades. In particular, domestic regions, along with central governments, are becoming more deeply involved in trans-border region-building processes, as exemplified by Russia’s North Western federative units more strongly gravitating toward Europe.

Second, the Russian academic discourse on regionalism is increasingly receptive to the normative issues that appear to affect the logic of region-building. The Nordic region is often referred to as the best example of the practicability of value-based policy as a region-building institutional tool. And Baltic Sea regionalism is to a significant degree modeled on similar normative foundations.

Third, there is a group of constructivist scholars in the Russian academic community who argue that the “cognitive maps” of regionalism have been increasingly shaped by immaterial factors (perceptions, imaginations, narratives, anticipations, role identities, etc.) as the most important shapers of region-building projects. Some regions (like the Barents-Euroarctic area) came into being as the result of creative imagination and its institutionalization. Most regions in the EU-Russia common neighborhood are “spaces-in-between” which lack a single identity and, therefore, are keen to play bridge-building roles.

Therefore, it is well understood in Russia that the EU-Russian neighborhood is an area with a high density of regional projects, initiatives, and conceptions. Not all of them are equally visible in the changing cognitive map of Europe, which makes their identification rather important for comprehending the dynamics of integrative and disintegrative drives in this part of the world.

## Comparing the Four Regions of the Common Neighborhood

The four regions that will be analyzed are so different that comparing them requires specific criteria. I will use the structure-agency approach for this purpose. First, in each of the four cases I will describe the structure of the region under consideration, relying upon the distinction between international systems, societies, and communities explicated by Barry Buzan.<sup>18</sup> Regional international systems are based upon material and physical elements—including a state’s military capabilities and the movement of goods/resources bereft of strong ideational content. Regional international systems exist as long as their constitutive members share common interests that make them compatible. It is mainly within regional international systems that a realist type of inter-state policy relations is possible. Regional international societies are based on socially constructed institutions with shared rules and procedures that regulate the behavior of regional actors who might have their own particular values and identities. In other words, common norms do not necessarily lead to identity-based solidarity beyond what is required for cooperative co-existence. The most important elements of regional international societies are rules that define what kind of conduct is legitimized.<sup>19</sup> Finally, a regional international community presupposes something more than rules and institutions—namely, a shared culture and “normative kinship” grounded in affection and/or tradition, as well as a “we-feeling” of belonging together and differentiating from “others.”

Second, I will explain what kind of Russian agency/actorship each of the three types of regional structures allows. More specifically, I will discuss the nature of Russian interests in each region, and the forms of Russia’s engagement with other players, above all the EU. Does Russia simply react to other states’ policies, or does it have its own policy lines? Does Russia contribute to institution-building, or merely receive the institutional benefits of region-building projects? These questions will help to better flesh out the differences between the Russian and the EU logics of region-making.

## Northern Europe: Common Identity, Different Institutions

*Structural factors.* Northern Europe appears to be the most illustrative example of a regional international community based upon a common identity sustained by a set of Nordic values. There are two different ways of conceptualizing the Nordic identity. Intrinsically, it is manifest in the formation of a “security community” based upon the deep de-securitization of relations between its members. The most radical prospect here is the idea of a “Nordic federation” that could play a leading role in the transformation of the neighboring Baltic Sea region.<sup>20</sup> The idea of “North” as an identity signifier was contrived as an alternative to the West-East dichotomy and in opposition to a centralized/“imperial” model of (EU)rope.

Yet the Nordic community, being cemented by common values, still leaves ample room for country-specific initiatives and institutional choices. Thus, Iceland and Norway are members of NATO but not the EU (though Norway participates in the EU’s Nordic Battle Group), while Finland and Sweden, vice versa, are members of the EU but not NATO (though they are among the biggest security contributors in NATO-led crisis management operations), and only Denmark participates in both institutions without, however, having joined the eurozone and the Common Security and Defense Policy.<sup>21</sup>

In the meantime, Nordic regionalism has its own external projection, as exemplified by the Northern Dimension initiated by Finland. Since 2006, the “old” Northern Dimension was reshaped into a multilateral institution with participation of the EU, Russia, Norway, and Iceland. The Arctic area is seen as its key priority area, which has allowed it to interact more with non-European countries like the United States and Canada.<sup>22</sup> The key problem with this extended version of the Northern Dimension is that it is not fit to deal with the highly conflictual structure of competitive relations in the Arctic area due to its lack of universally recognized legal provisions and vast room for individual, self-assertive, and self-justified actions in the struggle for resources.<sup>23</sup>

*Russia’s policies.* The effects of the multiplicity of institutional choices in Northern Europe have policy implications for Russia. Flexible and adaptable arrangements that blur the distinction between “insiders” and “outsiders” may help improve Russia’s relations with Europe, since not being a member of the EU or NATO does not exclude neighbors from closely participating in specific projects. All of this is particularly relevant for Russia’s North West regions because the Northern Dimension has increased the prospects of Europeanization in terms of co-participation in common projects, trans-border interaction, regional networking, etc.<sup>24</sup> The Northern Dimension was based on conceptual premises such as the transformation of borders from barriers to interfaces, the growing appeal of multi-level, trans-national, and cross-border governance, the prevalence of soft security concerns over hard security, and the increasing importance of cultural dynamics and economic flows compared to state-to-state liaisons. The whole idea was grounded in the technocratic logic of avoiding high politics in favor of projects in ecology, infrastructure development, urban planning, etc.<sup>25</sup> The external projection of Nordic regionalism is driven by it being a model that can spill over to other territories that neighbor the EU.<sup>26</sup> However, in the regional milieu Russia is not seen as “an active agenda-setter and remains primarily oriented towards the safest zones of low political cooperation,”<sup>27</sup> which means that it still gives preference to bilateral diplomatic negotiations.

The intricacies of Russian-Norwegian relations seem to be quite illustrative of the conflictual nature of bilateral bargains. Moscow was keen to publicly present the border delimitation treaty signed with Oslo in September 2010 as an exemplary case of a civilized resolution to a decade-long territorial dispute, but at the outset the treaty was severely criticized by Russian experts as a unilateral concession.<sup>28</sup> The detention of a Russian fishing vessel by the Norwegian coast guard near Spitzbergen in September 2011 made clear that the two parties interpret the concluded treaty differently. The Russian Foreign Ministry pointed to the alleged “political agreements” aimed at creating appropriate conditions for Russian fishing business after the treaty was signed,<sup>29</sup> which, as seen from the Norwegian vantage point, is a legally void argument.

The case of Northern European regionalism shows that identity-based forms of regional integration might act as an institutional example for one group of neighbors (the Baltic Sea states), remain mainly a discursive reference point for others' identities (Russia's northern territories), and appear to lose their functionality in a conflict-ridden environment dominated by the logics of competition and unilateralism (the Arctic area). Characteristics of regional identity are therefore context-dependent and have diverse institutional effects in different social structures.

### The Baltic Sea Region: Back to the 1990s?

*Structural factors.* The Baltic Sea region is an example of regional international society, grounded in a peculiar combination of networking type of regionalism and the great power management practices, with Russia and Germany at their core. Due to a multiplicity of linguistic, cultural, and ethnic traditions, the region lacks a common identity. However, this leaves ample space for institutional linkages that are mostly derived from two sources: the EU's normative hegemony and the transformative spillover effect of Nordic regionalism. The emergence of a new cooperative forum like the trilateral German-Russian-Polish policy forum has become an important part of the Baltic regional society. In the meantime, the cohesiveness of the region is confronted by a number of challenges, such as the lack of consensus among its members on the Nord Stream pipeline project and Moscow's attempts to use the Kaliningrad exclave as its military stronghold, as opposed to the "pilot region" concept widely debated in the 1990s.

*Russia's policies.* The "Baltic" debate in Russia is a good example of the cognitive split between academic expertise (based, by and large, on a liberal integrationist paradigm) and political discourse (which is much more state-centric and alarmist). From the academic perspective, Russia's domestic regions adjacent to the Baltic Sea are widely perceived as a peculiar part of Russia that, due to its cultural, historical, and geo-economic characteristics, is destined to integrate with Europe and set European standards for the rest of the country.<sup>30</sup> Yet from a political viewpoint, there are factors that push the tone in a less cooperative direction.

Even liberal experts see EU enlargement, of which Baltic regionalism was a pivotal part, as a menace to Russian economic interests.<sup>31</sup> In identity terms, for many Russian experts the pro-European Baltic narrative in 1990s was based on a modernist and essentialist presumption of the inevitable identity clash between Baltic Europe and Russia as its "Big Other."<sup>32</sup> In security terms, Moscow perceives Baltic region-making as a mechanism for adjusting the three Baltic states to EU and NATO standards. Consequently, the Kremlin believes in these states' unfriendliness to Russia and their deliberate intention to keep Russia out of Europe. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has repeatedly referred to Wikileaks information on NATO plans to defend Poland and the Baltic states from hypothetical Russian aggression as an indication of NATO's adversarial attitude toward Moscow.<sup>33</sup>

Russia also appears to be dissatisfied with some of the institutional arrangements in this region. In particular, it complained that the Council of Baltic Sea States (CBSS) functions as an offspring of the EU instead of playing a more independent role of its own.<sup>34</sup> In the meantime, Russian expectations of using CBSS as a platform for putting politically pressure on the Baltic countries in order to change their policies toward Russian-speaking minorities have not been met.

But the Baltic Sea region maintains its importance for Russia for two main reasons. First, the region is a key element of Russian energy security, of which the Nord Stream project is particularly significant. In the energy sector, Russia's most severe opponents are Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, who have been eager to form a bloc aimed at diversifying local energy markets, connecting their energy facilities to EU networks, and ultimately avoiding overdependence on Russia. As transit countries, they have their own understanding of energy security. On the Russian side, Moscow has decided to discontinue oil exports through the Baltic states by 2015.<sup>35</sup>

Yet the future of the region's institutional settings will certainly not depend on political positions taken by major government actors, but rather on an economic rationale that plays an increasingly

important role due to growing intra-regional interdependence. For instance, Moscow is eager to pursue its own energy policy, as exemplified by the launching of the Baltic nuclear power plant (NPP) in response to the closure of the Ingalina NPP, which accounted for 30–40 percent of Kaliningrad's power consumption. Russia announced this decision in spite of the EU's earlier proposal to connect Kaliningrad to Europe through the Coordination of Transmission of Electricity (UCTE). Yet the common electricity market in the Baltic region in fact functions as an offshoot of the EU system and therefore does not include Russia. As local experts forecast, Kaliningrad faces the peril of isolation from the regional electricity market, which would inevitably require the integration of Kaliningrad's electric power system in regional networks of the UCTE. This is especially important against the backdrop of the "extremely low energy efficiency of Russian manufacturing industries and utility services," which increases energy demand in Kaliningrad.<sup>36</sup>

Second, there is a wider set of issues related to Kaliningrad, which still has a chance to fulfill its function as a "pilot region" for Russia-EU cooperation, but is hindered by the resilience of old approaches. On the one hand, there is the ambitious concept of Kaliningrad as a "Russian Europe." In accordance with this logic, the Russian Foreign Ministry recognized the prospect for a facilitated visa regime in the Baltic Sea region by pointing to the positive experiences of Russian agreements with Norway, Poland, and Lithuania.<sup>37</sup> The Kremlin came up with a "72 visa-free hours" initiative for foreign tourists, which started despite some resistance from the State Border Service.<sup>38</sup>

The newly created "triangle" of Germany-Poland-Russia is a regional project that is expected to have a positive spillover effect for wider Europe. For the Russian Foreign Ministry, the practical importance of this trilateral format boils down to Germany's institutional capability to lobby for Russian-Polish trans-border cooperation projects in Brussels. Sergey Lavrov quite explicitly assumes that the Moscow-Warsaw-Berlin nexus will help promote regionally reached arrangements in the EU.<sup>39</sup> However, there is no Baltic consent in this matter:

Lithuania in particular has expressed its disagreement with the Russian-Polish proposals to extend the visa waivers agreement, initially applicable to the residents of border areas, to the entire Kaliningrad oblast.

Yet on the other hand, the Kremlin's policies toward Kaliningrad seem to be rather ambiguous and highly securitized. As a retired Russian diplomat opines, special arrangements for Kaliningrad are part of EU efforts to diminish Russian influence in neighboring areas.<sup>40</sup> Putin gloomily predicts that, "after solving the problem with the Kaliningrad oblast, the EU will block the visa-free talks with Russia."<sup>41</sup> Moscow is often insensitive to the economic needs of the Kaliningrad oblast, as illustrated by its policy of raising duties for foreign cars, which provoked harsh protests by residents of the enclave who depend on vehicles imported from European countries. President Medvedev's references to the ongoing remilitarization of Kaliningrad—as a response to US military plans in Eastern and Central Europe—reveal the resilience of the Kremlin's realpolitik logic. In this sense, the Putin and Medvedev presidencies resulted in a lost decade for Kaliningrad, where a significant part of the local population consider themselves "hostages to both Europe and Russia." Kaliningrad has now to some extent returned to the agenda of the 1990s, including the issues of the region's particularity, visa-free travel, and the recalibration of relations with Moscow.<sup>42</sup>

### The Black Sea Region as a "Conflict Formation"

*Structural factors.* The Black Sea region features a complicated combination of elements that are pertinent to both the regional international system (with two main types of "physical interactions": military force and trade in energy resources) and regional international society (with nascent institutions such as the Black Sea Economic Cooperation). This region is the site of three different region-building projects: Russian, European, and Turkish. These three powers compete with each other in a heterogeneous political milieu that stretches way beyond the group of geographically littoral states: about one half of states that are members of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation



have no immediate access to the Black Sea basin, which means that institutionally, this region transcends its geographic contours.

The question of who is deemed an “insider” and an “outsider” is extremely complicated in the Black Sea region. Russia itself vindicates the uncertainty of such a distinction: It welcomes investment from external financial resources (from the US, China, or Japan) in regional projects,<sup>43</sup> but changes its tone when it comes to security matters, where it complains about undue and excessive external (essentially US) overlay. In this respect, Russia can find common ground with Turkey, which—in spite of its NATO membership and application to the EU—is equally disinterested in the presence of external powers around the Black Sea and the Caucasus, and is skeptical about the efficacy of the West as a peacemaker in post-conflict situations. What makes Russia’s and Turkey’s policies compatible is their concern about the regional status quo and disdain for the possible negative effects of extra-regional powers on the 1936 Montreux Convention, which regulates the transit of warships and their stay in the Black Sea.<sup>44</sup> This legal document meets the security concerns of major littoral states by imposing restrictions on external powers regarding the total tonnage of military vessels and their presence in the Black Sea. Apart from the Montreux Convention, there are other institutional elements of region-building in the Black Sea, which are patronized by Turkey and largely accepted by Russia (such as BLACKSEAFOR and Black Sea Harmony projects). In the meantime, the depth of the Russian-Turkish partnership in the Black Sea region should not be overvalued: Ankara is eager to build “her own region”<sup>45</sup> that could be a potential springboard to the Caucasus, Central Asia, and China. Turkey has tried to strike a balance between its wider vision of the Black Sea as a region that connects three seas (Caspian, Aegean, and Mediterranean), while adhering to a more formal definition of the region as soon as it comes to issues of maritime security.

*Russia’s policies.* For Russia, the Black Sea is mainly a security region, or a “conflict formation.” The war in Georgia confirmed that it is a zone of competing interests and policies, and more of a source of

conflict than a potential terrain for peace and security. An additional factor that contributes to current tensions is the stationing of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet in Sebastopol, which became one of the hottest issues in Russian-Ukrainian relations under the Yushchenko presidency. Against this background, the August 2008 war strengthened the voices of those who see Russia as a potential imperial power that threatens the independence of its immediate neighbors. There is also a growing challenge from radical movements in the Russian North Caucasus, including Circassian groups that have actively used diaspora groups to hamper the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi. Russian political attitudes to organizations such as GUUAM and the Community for Democratic Choice (established in the aftermath of the “color revolutions” in Ukraine and Georgia) are overtly critical because the groups represent, in the eyes of Moscow, the effects of an unfriendly “overlay” of extra-regional forces (meaning the US) that seek to weaken and marginalize Russia in its “near abroad.”

Against this backdrop, Russia seems ready to play a realpolitik game of power balancing in this region. But such power balancing would not be with the EU, but rather with the United States, which may cause some resentment in Black Sea countries. Thus, there are many authoritative voices in Ukraine claiming that Barack Obama’s administration is believed to have set aside a “regional balancing approach” for the sake of “resetting” its bilateral relations with Moscow at the expense of Washington’s engagement with Russia’s pro-Western neighbors, including Ukraine.<sup>46</sup> The same is true with regard to Georgia: many in Washington believe that Georgia’s privileged position as a “democratic client” state ultimately “prevented Washington from soberly assessing the deteriorating situation in the South Caucasus in the spring 2008 run-up to the August war. Washington’s failure to restrain the Georgian leadership in August 2008 is indicative of the United States’ inability to translate its close ‘values-based’ relationship with Tbilisi into actual influence at the most critical of times.”<sup>47</sup>

Yet the US’s relative disengagement from countries in the Black Sea region did not strengthen Rus-

sia's hand. Of course, Russia's policies are meant to help maintain Russian supremacy in the region, which to Moscow is indispensable for the successful implementation of a multipolar world order. Yet Russia's "multipolar world"—enforced through the Georgian war of August 2008—may pose a threat to countries like Ukraine since, practically speaking, it is really the sum of regional "unipolarities" based on the dominant power of "regional leaders" and accepted by other major powers.<sup>48</sup> Seen from this vantage point, the more Russia pushes its vision of multipolarity as a type of global order, the more disadvantaged Russia's neighbors will feel, which will result in stronger resistance to Russian plans. This is also true in the Caspian Sea region.

### The Caspian Sea Region-to-Be

*Structural factors.* Arguably, the Caspian Sea region is an example of a regional system-in-the-making because it lacks a societal policy framework that is exemplified in common rules and shared norms. The Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict as well as international sanctions against Iran are major structural impediments to the effective implementation of social mechanisms in the region. The domination of geopolitical thinking and power balancing make the region a particular case of a semi-peripheral regional system that balances between several power centers. Countries in the region have different attitudes toward extra-regional powers: Russia and Iran are eager to prevent both the EU and US from interfering in intra-regional affairs, while others are more open to external overlays. This could be an indication of the weakness of Caspian Sea regionalism, but it could also be a source of its growing self-assertiveness vis-à-vis major centers of power.

The Caspian Sea region may thus be viewed as a regional security complex aimed at the gradual formation of a common space for security relations based on joint commitments. Compared to other regions, the Caspian Sea region has a rather specific common agenda—namely, the establishment of a sea-sharing regime. The key agenda-setting issue—the delineation of the sea floor among the five littoral states—requires a set of rules that must be established regionally, including littoral states' obligation to prevent using their territory for unfriendly

actions against other regional members; the exclusive rights of regional sovereigns to exploit resources; national flags for fishing and shipping; and exceptional rights for navigation reserved for littoral states.<sup>49</sup>

*Russia's policies.* Russian strategy in the Caspian Sea region can be explained through the concept of a "great power region," which is constructed and cemented by the dominating power. Russia has made great efforts to increase its influence in power politics with the Caspian countries. It encourages the strengthening of Iran in order "to prevent the United States from becoming a more successful player in the broader Middle East."<sup>50</sup> Moscow has also tried to make use of the anti-Western turn by the President of Azerbaijan who, in light of the Arab Spring, can be "treated as another corrupt autocrat whose term could expire any day."<sup>51</sup>

External forces include not only states but also trans-national companies,<sup>52</sup> some of which have a negative reputation in Russia. In particular, Russian experts have complained that the United States is using environmental programs to boost its influence in the Caspian Sea region.<sup>53</sup> In the same vein, the idea of dividing the Caspian Sea among national sectors is treated as a move that will facilitate an increased role for Western oil companies in the region, a vital area of US/NATO interests.<sup>54</sup>

In pursuing an inward-oriented strategy of regional self-sufficiency, Russia has workable bilateral relations with the four other littoral states of the Caspian Sea. However, these bilateral policies are conducive neither to greater cohesiveness within the regional environment nor to stronger solidarity among the potential members of a regional society. This means that Russia will not be able to have a monopoly in the Caspian region and will have to accept that other major powers—the EU, US, China, and Turkey—will increasingly compete for influence and resources. Russia's integration resources are quite limited and are insufficient for realizing its leadership ambitions. Yet it is the fear of Russian domination among other littoral states that ultimately paves the way for external overlays, which, as in the case of the Black Sea region, mostly concern US and NATO policies. As an

American scholar admits, “a primary objective of America’s Caspian policy will continue to be containment of Russian influence in the southern tier, including opposition to perceived Russian efforts to exert coercive military or economic pressure on the developing states of the region. Indeed, perceptions of such Russian hegemonic conduct have mounted in the US policy-making community with the emergence of President Putin’s more assertive approach to safeguarding Russian interests in the ‘near abroad.’”<sup>55</sup> Yet this logic may push “Russia and Iran together to obstruct developments in Caspian Sea oil” that favor Western companies.<sup>56</sup> That is why the combination of balancing and containment is not conducive to promoting regional integration, which would necessitate a more inclusive approach that engages both Russia and Iran.<sup>57</sup>

## Comparing the Four Cases: Analytical Conclusions

There are several important issues that the region-focused analysis has helped elucidate.

*First*, regional policies from Russia and the EU seriously differ from each other in terms of interests and approaches. For the EU, regionalism is important in terms of “breaking up the dualism of enlargement/inclusion and neighborhood/exclusion policies ... and coming up with hybrid solutions that are at the same time inside and outside of overlapping communities.”<sup>58</sup> It is in the interests of the EU to project the normative experiences of regional integration within Europe beyond its borders. In fact, through a “mosaic of dialogues and far-reaching multilateral cooperation mechanisms,” the EU can promote “shared governance structures” that consist of concentric circles—from those neighbors which accept the *acquis communautaire* to those partners with whom legal harmonization and convergence have to be negotiated.<sup>59</sup> In sharp contrast to EU policies, the Kremlin mostly handles regions from a neorealist perspective, i.e. as instruments that states utilize for geopolitical purposes of power maximization.

Yet it would be wrong to think that the EU always adheres to its “normative power” role, or that Russia is always a “realpolitik” type of actor. It is only

by addressing Russian and EU policies toward a variety of region-building projects that we can comprehend the structural circumstances in which Moscow and Brussels deviate from the corresponding logics of realism and normativity. The EU may by necessity play by the rules of *realpolitik* in the Caspian Sea region, while Russia may take more normative approaches to initiating, along with Poland, cross-border and visa facilitation projects on the regional level.

*Second*, in this paper I took a critical look at the policy connotations of the concept of external influence. While the Baltic Sea region is relatively immune to the involvement of external powers (with exceptions such as the US’s North European Initiative), the Caspian Sea and Black Sea regions are much more exposed to external influences. Both regions give good illustrations of how impractical are Russia’s efforts to block extra-regional interferences and search for purely regional solutions to a plethora of unsolved issues of security, development, and institution-building. It is doubtful that regional actors themselves—without any influence from the West—would be able to provide stability in—and security to—the respective regions. On the contrary, for countries like Azerbaijan or Ukraine, it is critically important to convince the West in maintaining their high level of interest in them.<sup>60</sup> Ukraine displays particular sensitivity to the dynamics of US-Russian relations; some argue that the bilateral “reset” policy of Moscow and Washington makes Kiev feel that it is “left alone with a no less aggressive Russia, with no objection from Washington.”<sup>61</sup> By the same token, Azerbaijan’s policies are heavily influenced by the dynamics of Turkish-Armenian relations that, in their turn, depend on EU and US political stances that are under heavy impacting by the Armenian diaspora. The Azerbaijan-Armenia talks are mediated by Switzerland, which clearly is an extra-regional power.

*Third*, a variety of regional practices provides some food for thought about identities and institutions that would ideally harmonize the region-making process. But if a common identity is missing, there are still possibilities to build regions on the basis of adherence to common rules. The case of the



Baltic Sea region demonstrates that the absence of a common identity (in terms of language, religion, culture, and history) does not hinder the functioning of common institutions, most of which gravitate toward the EU as the dominating power. The lack of a normative hegemony, which is comparable to the EU's role in the Baltic Sea, prevents effective region-building in the Black Sea and Caspian Sea regions.

*Fourth*, regional cases show that there are different overlays and different hegemonies. The EU is a hegemonic actor in the Baltic Sea region, yet this hegemony is not a hindrance, but rather an indispensable condition for region making. What matters is whether the major powers compete for influence or cooperate with each other. A region's dominant structural model—system, society, or community—is also important. Against this background, it can be argued that in identity-based regions, the external overlay only plays a minimal role (as with the Nordic region), external overlay is more likely in institution-based regions (Black Sea region), while more under-institutionalized regional systems (such as the Caspian Sea region) will find that external overlay is inevitable, despite the isolationist postures of some regional actors.

*Fifth*, regional cases are instrumental in fleshing out a variety of Russian policies in its near abroad, which do not necessarily submit to a single logic of integration. It is very likely that Russian policies in one of these regions may contravene its policies in another region. Thus, Russia's intention to reduce Ukraine's role in the transit of natural gas provoked different institutional effects in two regions: In the Baltic Sea region, Russia and Germany have followed the model of "great power management," while in the Black Sea region, there is much stronger competition between Russia and the EU for alternative energy projects.

*Sixth*, the region-making process can take different forms. In a first scenario, regions may be viewed as extensions of multilateral agreements, or a move from a "pro-multilateral policy to intensified regionalism,"<sup>62</sup> as exemplified by the Black Sea region-building project. Regions of a second type may come about due to pressure from

external actors whose roles may be crucial. For instance, "the EU has certainly put pressure on Eastern European states to create new regions."<sup>63</sup> Western support for regional-making may become a confidence-promoting and conflict-prevention mechanism, since the stimulation of trans-/cross-border projects ought to decrease the likelihood of military conflicts.<sup>64</sup> The most illustrative case here is the Baltic Sea region. In a third scenario, regions may emerge as direct products of the consolidation of former marginal areas, a situation which might be dubbed "assertive regionalism."

## Policy Implications for Russia and the EU

Of the three scenarios mentioned above, Russia would certainly prefer the first one, since it lacks the EU's soft power instruments and does not welcome the uncontrolled self-assertion of its neighbors in its "near abroad." Though it is still quite unclear exactly how a model of multilateral regionalism would look, it appears that Russia's engagement with the EU will play a crucial role in each particular case. However, the overall prospects for the near future are not very promising. In the coming years, Russia will most likely concentrate its resources more on solidifying and even expanding the Customs Union than on searching for common ground with the EU across their common border. The European Union, for its part, will not be institutionally capable of upgrading and resetting its "Eastern policy" due to its current focus on its internal problems (above all the eurozone crisis) and the growing salience of post-Arab Spring political and security issues. It is quite indicative that Poland, the architect of the "Eastern Partnership," shifted its policy priorities from Eastern Europe to the intra-European arena by the end of its EU rotating presidency in the second half of 2011, in an effort to invigorate the nascent German-Polish political nexus.<sup>65</sup>

Yet it is exactly at this juncture that opportunities arise for EU-Russian interaction in their common neighborhood. The German-Polish-Russian informal "triangle" has a chance to become a working (though weakly institutionalized) model of joint management for some regional issues. However,

the cooperative spirit of the European partners will be directly affected by Russia's ability to deliver policy changes at the regional level. Unfortunately, it is at this point that Moscow's power in its "near abroad" comes into question. It is indicative that despite its explicit political rhetoric, the Kremlin was unable to prevent the former President of Transnistria, Igor Smirnov, from running for reelection. Germany regards the breakaway region as a test case for German-Russian security relations in wider Europe. Along with Moscow's failure to implement its policies during the presidential election in South Ossetia, these two cases illustrate how weak Russia is, even in territories that are economically dependent on Russia.

Yet even with Russia as a weak partner, the EU can find some areas of mutual interest in the common neighborhood. It is more or less clear what these common points might be in the Baltic Sea region: the co-management of energy project(s) and the revitalization of the idea of Kaliningrad as a "pilot project" for EU-Russian relations. It is much less clear how the joint "ownership" of regional initiatives might look in the Black Sea region, where Russia lacks a policy vision comparable to the EU's Black Sea Synergy. The common denominator for both parties could be a strategy of de-securitizing the Black Sea region, which seems to be consonant with Russian sensitivities to the forthcoming Sochi Olympics in 2014, and with the EU's legacy of playing a mediating role in the August 2008 conflict between Russia and Georgia. As far as the Caspian Sea region is concerned, the contours of the EU-Russian common agenda remain unclear. Both parties could potentially pool their resources in order to prevent military conflicts in this part of their shared neighborhood, focus their efforts on helping bring Iran more in line with the international community, and engage Azerbaijan in a denser set of political and economic relations that would reduce the likelihood of a new military conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh.

For the EU, the effectiveness of EU-Russian cooperation will to a large extent depend upon the compatibility of their respective visions for the common neighborhood. Should the EU prefer to ground its policy in imagining/constructing the

regions of the South Caucasus and Central Asia, Russia's role in these projects would be more of an external power than of a co-participant. And vice versa, the EU's focus on the Black Sea and Caspian Sea regions will necessitate the search for common solutions that, in my view, have to be based on the possible spill-over effects of specific political or economic initiatives. For example, the experience of EUBAM (European Union's Border Assistance Mission, operating on the Ukrainian-Moldovan border to control smuggling) clearly demonstrates that the EU's "external governance" in the common neighborhood may be beneficial for local countries as well as Russia. Politically, much will depend on whether the December 2011 presidential election in Transnistria will trigger progress in the German-Russian Meseberg initiative. In Abkhazia, one of the decisive factors is whether the much-discussed policy of "engagement without recognition" will somehow materialize, and whether it may be considered as an acceptable option by Moscow. In the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, since both Russia and EU are interested in avoiding hostilities, they may diplomatically coordinate the signals they send to the conflicting parties in the expectation that greater economic engagement will lead to more political responsiveness. It is only through these bilaterally coordinated policy tracks that both Russia and the EU can make their common neighborhood safer.

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